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Creeping Online: Canadian Feminist Scholarly Journals

By Katherine Side¹

Abstract

World-wide, there are over 4,000 peer-reviewed, scholarly, open access journals (Geist 2009). Theoretically, they are available to all of those with internet access. In Women's and/ Gender Studies, open access journals publish research findings, discussion and debate and often, creative submissions. In other disciplines, such as the natural sciences, they are also locations to share large data sets and provide access to preliminary research findings. *The Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities* calls for the extension of accessibility with the explicit intention of knowledge distribution and knowledge sharing (2003). This article explores the status of online feminist scholarly journals, given this context.

Keywords: Canadian feminism, open-access journals, feminist scholarship, feminist publishing

Introduction

There are intense discussions about the potential and the pitfalls of open access publishing. For some, it provides a 'commons' for knowledge and contributes to the common good, while others are concerned about its effect on the publishing industry and on libraries and are critical of its technological determinism. It is impossible to capture all of the nuances of these discussions here, so I have no intention of trying to do so. Instead, I want to consider some of this discussion in relation to the context that I most often inhabit, that of Canadian Women's Studies, including in my position as editor for the "Journal of Choice" of the Canadian Women's Studies Association, and as a Canadian editor of the *Journal of International Women's Studies*.

In this paper, I ask why so few open access, feminist scholarly journals have emerged in Canada. I distinguish between on-line publishing, which refers to a distribution model for scholarly journals, and open-access publishing, often associated with a business model. I focus my attention primarily on the latter, in relation to Canadian, Anglophone feminist scholarly journals.

Why does it appear that print-based Canadian feminist scholarly journals are only just "creeping online" and, what are the implications of this approach for engaging in and across transnational feminist scholarship? I argue that the unevenness in the development of open access feminist journals is mirrored by an unevenness of the possible implications. It may be too early to predict outcomes, but some issues arise, specifically: 1) issues of geographic concentration, 2) a specialist focus of feminist open-access journals and, 3) the ability of Canadian scholars to engage in transnational feminist discussions and debates.

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Canadian Open Access Journals

Open access directories compile lists of peer-reviewed, open-access scholarly journals, often organized by their country of origin. The Directory of Open Access Journals lists twenty-five journal titles under the category "Gender Studies." All of these are "born digital," having had no print presence or distribution prior to their establishment. Four of the twenty-five are Canadian.

This small number is not surprising. Michael Geist, a Canadian legal scholar and expert in technology, suggest Canada lags behind European countries and the United States in the development of open access, scholarly journals (2009; Eaves 2009). There are some likely reasons for this. First, broad support is required for open access publishing. In Canada, there is no university-wide, province-wide, or national requirement to make research accessible through open access repositories. Some departments, in universities, have developed open access policies. For example, the Department of Library Science at University of Calgary requires scholars and researchers to deposit copies of their published research with an Open Access Institutional Repository, but no wide-spread policy exists.

Second, Canadian national granting agencies, and publishers, have been relatively slow to support the development of open access scholarly journals. In Canada, there are three national granting agencies for research: the Canadian Institutes for Health Research; the Natural Science Research Council of Canada and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. The Canadian Institute for Health Research established a mandatory requirement for open access publication in 2008, and the Natural Science Research Council is developing one. Initially supportive of open-access publishing, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council has relaxed its position somewhat. Instead, its focus is on awareness, education and promotion. Through an open competition process, it offers a limited programme for print based scholarly journals moving toward on-line publishing.

Feminist Scholarly Journals

There are three further explanations that may be specific to feminist publications in Canada. First, because considerations of Gender and/Women's Studies are not deeply embedded within any of the three national granting agencies, they are unlikely to be brought along by their open-access initiatives. Considerations of women have a consistently low profile in the Natural Science Research Council; women are most often mentioned to the National Chair Holders programme which is publicly criticized for their under representation (Side and Robbins 2007). The Canadian Institutes for Health Research includes a specific gender and health committee, but is heavily shaped by a biomedical approach. Within the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Women and/Gender Studies has never constituted a separate research committee. It has always been subsumed under other disciplinary and thematic areas, marginalizing the place of its scholarship, publication and researchers (Heald). A small number of scholarly journals do receive funding, based on open competition, from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, Aid to Scholarly Journals Programme; few of these are feminist journals.

Second, most Canadian feminist print-based journals are not associated with prominent university and/or commercial presses. Some, such as *Atlantis*, have no “third party aggregator” (i.e., relationships (with Proquest and EBSCO) for distribution. Lorimer, Lynch and Provencal note that a “striking feature of Canadian scholarly journals is that most lack a designated publisher – an individual “who considers the journal’s strategic interests and is well-informed about general market trends, evolving practices, pricing policies, marketing, copyright issues [and] digital rights management” (2006, 9). Often housed within university departments and institutes, support for feminist journals varies considerably. Most rely on relatively small subscription bases, both individual and institutional, on revenues generated from off prints and on in-kind support. In some cases, they may accrue revenue from the sale of print copies through booksellers, although many booksellers deal only with distribution houses (Bittman, Lynch and Pauls 2007). As a result, many feminist scholarly journals are on the periphery of scholarly publication.

Third, calls for open access scholarly journals have emerged, in Canada, out of a federal agenda concerned with “excellence,” innovation and making Canada competitive in a global economic market, an agenda about which some feminist scholars remain suspicious and/or critical.

Creeping On-Line: Cautious Approaches to Open Access

Some long established, print-based feminist journals are creeping on-line. They make some of their content available on-line, although typically, only enough to entice subscriptions. For example, the journal *Atlantis* offers open access to book reviews and interviews with Canadian Women’s Studies Association Book Award winners. It offers access to a few select full issues to non-subscribers and password protected electronic access to subscribers. Also, it offers a searchable index that includes abstracts. Outside of this, all access requires a subscription, or purchase. Another print-based journal, *Resources for Feminist Research*, provides on-line access only to article abstracts. *Canadian Woman Studies* offers on-line content at all.

At the other end of the spectrum, a small number of peer-reviewed, feminist scholarly journals are “born digital”. These include: *Canadian Online Journal of Queer Studies in Education*; *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*; *Women’s Health and Urban Life* and *Women and Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, the latter being the earliest, in 1997. Let me come back to the three concerns, which I raised in the introduction, with specific reference to these “born digitals.”

Geographic Concentration

In theory, open access journals are equipped to address the challenges posed by Canada’s vast geography. Theoretically, they are accessible to scholars with internet access, no matter how remote their location. In reality, open access publications in Canada are largely the result of the masculinist terminology, “lone rangers.” These are the individuals, with the appropriate academic and technological backgrounds, who assume primarily responsibility for open access journal.

In Canada, the presence of “lone rangers” has resulted in an unintended geographic concentration. Three out of four feminist open access journal titles are published by the University of Toronto. It is located in a large urban centre, in the most densely populated region of the country. It is Canada’s largest university with approximately 70,000 students, and has the deepest pockets. Open access feminist journals an unprecedented opportunity to establish the centrality of its scholars and its scholarship.

For instance, a browse through the archives on *The Canadian Online Journal of Queer Studies in Education* reveals that the city of Toronto is its central focus. Submissions by scholars at Toronto universities range from thirty percent of all articles in one issue, to over eighty percent in another. It is problematic to suggest that this journal currently addresses queer studies in education outside of this major urban centre. In Canada, it would appear that those locations that could be most enhanced by open access feminist scholarly journals are, at the moment, the least equipped to access them.

Scholarly Specialization

There is also a notable trend toward scholarly specialization in feminist open-access journals in Canada. The “born digital” journals that have developed in Canada are largely directed toward examinations of specialized topics and/or audiences. This includes urban health scholars, emerging scholars, and specialized topics in interdisciplinary areas.

The development of specializations reflects the interests, concerns and scholarly networks of their “lone rangers.” However, we do not understand the full extent to which they may also address ‘unaddressed silences’: the possibility of homophobia amongst educators and the dismissal of religion and/or anti-Semitism within the presumed secular spaces of feminist scholarship. The scholarly specialization of open-access feminist journals can expand feminist engagement in various discussions and debates; it has also be criticized as “more and more, about less and less” (Whitworth and Friedman 2009).

There is relatively little discussion about how open-access publications are regarded in and by scholarly communities. Although Brian Whitworth and Rob Friedman predict “a social upheaval in academic publishing, as it shifts from a feudal to [a] democratic form,” I am less convinced that it is already upon us; I recall that when the print journal with which I am involved, moved book reviews to an on-line form, many of reviewers expressed their clear and unequivocal preference for the print format.

Transnational Engagement

Canadian scholars are not limited from contributing to and editing on-line and open access feminist journals. A review of a decade of publishing in the *Journal of International Women’s Studies* indicates that scholars who affiliated with Canadian universities (as graduate students, faculty members and post-doctoral scholars) have contributed just over eight percent of all published articles. Canadian scholars also participate in other projects, such as digital archives and as editors for on-line and open-access journals (Conrad and Mulally 2009). We have, however, been relatively unsuccessful in developing an on-line and open-access scholarly presence.

The full implications of this muted presence are not yet clear. Some Canadian feminist scholars may be inclined to publish in international open-access journals,

increasing their own professional status in the prevailing 'publish or perish' climate, but possibly weakening the visibility of Canadian feminist journals. The move toward specialized publication mirrors the growth in graduate (particularly doctoral) programmes, but it not clear if and how they will benefit Women and/Gender Studies undergraduate programmes, some which are institutionally quite fragile (Marchbank). Finally, open-access publishing could enhance the position of some feminist scholarly journals and their ability to engage it transnational feminism, but doing so may leave others behind.

Conclusion

One managing editor with whom I spoke, suggested that the move toward open access feminist journals in Canada is "bound to come." The most significant challenges are likely to be faced by the longest and most well-established scholarly journal titles in Canadian feminist publishing. They face the challenge of shifting to a new format, learning new technologies, rebuilding a solid financial base and carrying their readership along with them.

The "born digitals" do not face these same challenges, but they will face others, such as an adequate recognition for their labour, time, skills and costs and the realities of maintaining the stability of publication in the face of, institutional moves and unanticipated circumstances.

An unevenness in the development of open access feminist scholarly journals in Canada appears, as yet, mirrored by an unevenness of their implications, but we need to be paying close attention to these implications now if we are to pave the way to a solid future in feminist scholarly publishing in Canada and beyond it.

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